

Additional Views to H.R. 840, "Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2008"

The undersigned Members of the Committee acknowledge the significant work that the Chairman, Ranking Member, and other Members and staff have done to address many of the concerns we raised about addressing the needs of homeless unaccompanied youth, children, and their families in H.R. 840, a bill introduced by the late Rep. Julia Carson as well as Rep. Geoff Davis.

There are inconsistencies in the definition of homeless for programs administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as compared to those administered by the Departments of Education, Justice, and Human Services. In the education section of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the Head Start Act, the same homeless definition is used. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act program uses a similar definition. However, the housing component of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act uses a different definition, which excludes a majority of the unaccompanied youth, children, and families recognized as homeless by non-HUD federal homeless programs.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of homeless students, homeless and disabled children, homeless infants, and homeless children running away from domestic violence, unsafe housing, or unstable living conditions are denied HUD homeless housing and services.

Several witnesses, including Dr. Ellen Bassuk, an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, testified before our Committee that many homeless children who are currently excluded from HUD's homeless definition are prone to health and developmental problems. Dr. Bassuk said that there is documented evidence that almost 90 percent of homeless families end up doubled-up, which results in severe overcrowding and dangerous situations. The homeless children in these families are at significant risk of physical and sexual abuse, have seen people shot and killed, or have had their own lives threatened. Highly mobile homeless students suffer academically, are less likely to graduate, are sick more than the average child, and are more likely to have behavior problems.

Homelessness among children is only becoming more pervasive. A study conducted by First Focus and the Brookings Institute determined that almost 2 million children will be affected by the foreclosure crises. Many of these children will become homeless, but, tragically, they will not qualify for HUD homeless housing assistance or services.

H.R. 840, as introduced, would reconcile the definitions of homeless used among HUD and the other federal programs that serve homeless unaccompanied youth, children, and families. In addition, as introduced, the bill would recognize as homeless many individuals and families that are not recognized as homeless by these other federal programs.

For many months, we have worked with Members of the Committee, staff, and government and non-government

organizations representing various homeless constituencies to craft a new HUD definition of homeless that would allow homeless unaccompanied youth, children, and their families served by other federal programs to also be recognized by HUD as homeless and therefore qualify for HUD homeless housing and services.

On July, 31, 2008, during the Committee's consideration of H.R. 840, Rep. Biggert and Rep. Davis offered an amendment to allow all children and youth considered homeless by four other federal programs to be considered homeless by HUD. They withdrew the amendment because of an agreement with the Chairman that they would: (1) continue to work on language to amend HUD's definition of homeless as the bill moved out of Committee toward full House consideration; and (2) send a joint letter requesting that GAO examine the issue of homeless definition discrepancies and related matters.

Between July 31, 2008 and today, we and our staff have worked with the Chairman and Housing and Community Opportunity Subcommittee Chairwoman Waters, Education and Labor Committee Chairman Miller and Ranking Member McKeon, and their staff on a letter to GAO and new language to expand HUD's definition of homeless to include more homeless unaccompanied youth, children, and their families.

On September 23, 2008, we joined the above-mentioned Members and sent a letter to GAO. In recent days, we offered language to Senate and House Members and staff negotiating the final language of H.R. 840 and S. 1518 to include homeless children, unaccompanied youth, and their families in HUD's definition of homeless. We are pleased that Senate and House Members have agreed to include the following language as part of HUD's definition of homeless:

Unaccompanied youth and homeless families with children and youth defined as homeless under other Federal statutes who--

(A) have experienced a long term period without living independently in permanent housing,

(B) have experienced persistent instability as measured by frequent moves over such period, and

(C) can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time because of chronic disabilities, chronic physical health or mental health conditions, substance addiction, histories of domestic violence or childhood abuse, the presence of a child or youth with a disability, or multiple barriers to employment.

It is our hope that by expanding HUD's definition of homeless in this way, local, homeless service providers will have the flexibility to provide homeless housing and services to unaccompanied youth and children in involuntary and unstable shared living arrangements, such as those living temporarily in motels or hotels or 'couch surfing' from house to house. The ultimate goal is to break the cycle of poverty, violence, and homelessness in our country by providing homeless unaccompanied youth and children with the opportunity to qualify for safe and stable housing so that they have a better chance of being healthy, performing better in school, and having a chance for a brighter future.

Judy Biggert.

Geoff Davis.

Shelley Moore Capito.